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ABSTRACT

Intensive summer language schools are designed to increase student exposure to the target language, both in quantity and type. One way to increase student interest in the input is for a journalism class to produce a daily student newspaper in the target language. Such a project has gained popularity at a Portland, Oregon intensive German summer school. The newspaper project holds the interest of these intensive language students, for it allows them to read about up to the minute news events in the target language, ridding them of any feelings of isolation from the real world. The publication's language is usually quite simple since it is created by students for students, and it can report campus, local, and world news. The skills practiced in producing the newspaper go beyond classroom language skills, entailing news gathering, class discussion, interviewing and other specialized information gathering, translation, and organization and composition of the articles. It has been found to be an extremely time-efficient activity because of the intensive student participation. Students have also sharpened journalistic skills, German keyboard use, and word separation skills. Undergraduate or beginning graduate courses in which the students have had some advanced composition and conversation and are interested in improving, accelerating, and diversifying their writing skills, are best suited for this kind of course. (MSE)

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PROVIDING STUDENTS WITH MORE THAN JUST ANOTHER CLASS PROJECT

A Journalism Writing Course at a German Summer School

Stephen Krashen, linguist and published author of articles on second language acquisition at the University of Southern California, has posited that the failure of all language teaching methods is attributable to the following three shortcomings:

A. The teacher usually does not succeed in making the language input for students truly interesting, as it is almost impossible to find material which students really want to read or discuss. If, on the other hand, such interesting material could be found, students would no longer be forced to concentrate on acquiring language, but rather on the material itself, and consequently "the rule of forgetting" might lead to Krashen's stated paradox that, when you think you are acquiring, you are not; but when you think that you are not acquiring, you might be.

B. The type of input, no matter how topical and interesting, is mostly restricted to discourse suitable for the classroom and not at all specific to real-world type situations and tasks.

C. The quantity of input in a normal classroom situation is much too little to acquire a language. Assuming, for example, that a child acquires his first language for twelve hours each day for the first eight years of his life, this would amount to roughly 35000 hours of input. Even

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> supposing that motivated adults may learn in a more organized, and therefore faster fashion, the Foreign Service Institute, with its ideal conditions, still estimates that intermediate competency in a foreign language is attained after 720 hours of instruction. This compares with about 200 hours of instruction in a normal four-semester college language requirement.

In order to alleviate the last shortcoming mentioned by Krashen, namely the low quantity of input, a number of intensive summer language institutes have been designed. At the Deutsche Sommerschule am Pazifik in Portland, Oregon, students pledge to write, read and speak only in German for the duration of the seven week institute, and to forgo English language newspapers as well as radio and television. Considering that this summer school is normally attended by students who have had at least two years of college German, and assuming also that these students are exposed to German during the 49 days of the institute for about 15 hours a day — even if only a much smaller number of hours is spent in a formal classroom setting —, it becomes obvious that these 735 hours of German have a considerable impact, particularly as they are concentrated into such a brief time span and also, because the language becomes the necessary means of communication inside as well as outside of the classroom, and thereby applicable to real-world type situations and tasks.

Thus the intensive setting of such a summer school has succeeded in

improving two of the factors which Krashen mentions as impeding language learning. This paper addresses a means of also alleviating the first and foremost shortcoming mentioned by him, namely the usual lack of imput which is truly interesting to students.

Students at such an institute are, of course, highly motivated to learn German. Their reasons may be quite diverse. They usually are also keenly interested in their immediate environment. This interest grows, as they feel themselves progressively cut off from that environment because of the pledge which they took, namely not to listen to English language newscasts or read English language newspapers. Within a week many of them become news-starved. German short wave broadcasts would be available as well as dated German newspapers. But they are almost never used, as their news value is either not applicable to their current environment or has long since diminished. For information about their current local environment students must depend on two sources: a) the mute broadcast of the NBC Evening News which is simultaneously translated into German by one of the resident faculty members and b) the daily student produced newspaper -- Das Sommerblättchen -- written and published by the journalism class.

This daily paper, which was introduced within the framework of a regular course about five years ago, is appealing to students for several reasons: through it they can gather language input at their own speed and are not dependent on the fast-paced simultaneous

translation of the television broadcast which remains incomprehensible to many of the weaker students. Like the television news, the paper informs them about current world events -- but beyond that the emphasis is on news from Germany, whereever possible, and events from Oregon and Portland. And beyond those items it informs them about the summer school itself. It prints announcements, interviews with fellow students and faculty, feature articles about excursions and planned events, course descriptions and reviews of lectures held on previous days, as well as many other items of acutely personal interest to students and faculty alike. It therefore renders material which can be termed "truly interesting" according to Krashen. The circulation of the paper is kept at about 10 percent below the number of faculty and students at the school to create a demand slightly larger than the supply and thus provide for a speedy "sell-out" of the edition. Usually, the paper has vanished from the rack within 20 to 30 minutes after its appearance right before lunch which students take together at the college cafeteria. Das Sommerblättchen is their favorite reading material during that period of free time, and students read in the target language without ever being forced to do so.

Another very important reason for the paper's success is the fact that its language is usually quite simple, mostly having been created by students for students. It is spontaneous, current, without any textbook quality about it. There are even occasional spelling errors or grammatical mistakes in Das Sommerblättchen, which, like the students, has not always mastered the language to perfection. Thus

students can identify with the paper, as it does not have the appearance of wanting to teach them language, but rather provide them with a message. To reiterate Krashen's idea, students don't necessarily think that they are acquiring language, and therefore just might be.

The paper adheres to a roughly similar format every day. World news and summerschool news appear on the first page, feature articles, interviews, reports and critiques on the following pages, and sports, a German cartoon and a brief satirical piece on the last page. Through this format students are exposed to a comprehensible context which through the repetition of similar features provides a built-in review. As Krashen observes, "the case for narrow reading is based on the idea that the acquisition of both structure and vocabulary comes from many exposures in a comprehensible context." 1/

The popularity of Das Sommerblättchen with students at the institute can be documented through the written student evaluations which are administered at the end of each session. Also, each year there are some students who proudly announce that they succeeded in collecting a complete set of the seven week run of the Sommerblättchen. Such popularity in turn has a salutary effect upon the students in the journalism class itself, who feel personally responsible for the daily success of the class project. There are

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1/ Stephen Krashen, "The Case for Narrow Reading," TESOL Newsletter, 1981, vol. 15, no. 6, p. 23.

virtually no absences, and students spend a lot of extra time outside the regular class hours not only writing articles, but also helping to type, collate, staple and distribute the paper. As a matter of fact, often students not enrolled in the class appear at the "Redaktionsbüro" during the late morning, offering to help putting the paper together, ostensibly because such help assures them a copy.

The journalism class is also unique, since the success of the project does not depend so much on the teacher, but rather on the students. Failure, on the other hand, is not only visible to the individual student and the teacher, but rather to the whole class and the readership at large. Obviously, such high visibility creates a high degree of motivation, dependability and cooperation within the class. Students want to perform on their own in this kind of setting.

The skills which are practiced go beyond those exercised in an ordinary language class. One requirement for articles submitted is that they must be interesting to the readers. The class as a whole helps to decide what may be most interesting for the next edition. Each morning the first order of business is to discuss possible topics and stories for the following day. After this discussion specific assignments are taken by the students. Often students are unaccustomed to writing for interest, as many teacher-assigned college compositions have stifled their initiative and created uncertainty as to what might really interest others in and of itself. Students are initially reticent to suggest topics on which they would like to

write, and the teacher must have a number of topics ready at the beginning of the course. The daily predetermined sections in the paper, such as world news, summerschool news, sports, etc. are helpful, as they allow the assignment of these tasks to a student unsure about a topic. Interviews with fellow students or a faculty member are a helpful second step for such a student, as he must determine the interesting aspects of such a story by himself and must conduct the interview in such a fashion as to obtain an interesting story. Furthermore, many language skills, written as well as oral, are practiced in an interview, as the interviewer must ask questions, listen for responses, take notes, summarize, and compose a text in the target language. After a brief time the number of student-suggested topics usually increases, although some students will always remain more comfortable with suggestions from the teacher. Since different language skills are practiced in the different categories of articles -- for example written translation skills and specialized vocabularies in the preparation of the world news, listening and note taking skills in interviews, and different spezialized vocabularies, organizational and compositional skills in writing on a free topic — a student must choose a different type of assignment each day. Because the class size is usually small, the five to eight students repeat individual categories frequently enough to acquire both, structure and vocabulary, from repeated exposures to similar contexts.

A further requirement is accuracy, clarity and conciseness. Students must not only use correct vocabulary, grammar and syntax in

the target language, but also accommodate their own writing styles in the foreign language to the objectives of the different article categories. The largest segment of the class sessions is therefore devoted to the preparation of the individual articles for actual printing. In order to accomplish the tasks just mentioned and at the same time diminish the role of the teacher as much as possible, students correct and edit each other's articles together with the help of an opaque projector. Each article is projected onto a screen for all students to see; they learn to recognize each other's strengths and weaknesses in style and grammar and they correct mistakes together. This kind if team work is probably the most important aspect of the course. Students critique each other's grammar, syntax and style, and at the same time help each other. The role of the teacher is that of an arbiter, while most of the activity in this correction phase comes from the students. Under the teacher's guidance and through constant and repeated exposure to each other's writing, the students develop a critical eye for correct word usage, syntax, idiomatic structure and style in each other's, and eventually, in their own writing. The procedure is unusually class-time efficient, because all students are participating at all times. And the psychological effect of peer correction seems infinitely stronger than that of teacher corrections, since teachers know everything better anyhow. As students continuously observe their peers, there is a growing desire to avoid mistakes, since they do not want to appear incompetent in front of each other. In a further enhancement of

Krashen's theory, this classroom procedure does not only spawn interest in the message, but also in the conveyor of the message, namely the target language itself. The procedure hightens the student's sensitivity towards the target language, without putting the individual on the spot in a confrontation with the teacher but rather with his peers. As pressure thus diminishes, perhaps Krashen's earlier quoted statement is again applicable, that when you think that you are acquiring, you are not, but when you think that you are not acquiring, you actually might be.

There are fringe benefits for the journalism students which deal only peripherally with language acquisition, but which are useful, nevertheless. Because the newspaper is set in columns to facilitate quick reading, students must sharpen their word separation skills. Typing skills in German and on a German keyboard are likewise improved. Estimating the length of an article for advanced layout purposes is important for the appearance of the paper. Thus students learn some organizational skills. Above all, however, students find that they must be able to function in a real-life stressful situation with real-life interdependent responsibilities, such as they might encounter, were they to visit and especially work in Germany.

The journalism course is best suited for undergraduate or beginning graduate students who have had at least one or two advanced composition and conversation classes, and who are particularly interested in improving, accelerating and diversifying their writing

skills. Through the method of instruction which attempts to involve all students in written and oral target language production at all times, a corollary will be increased oral skills as well. In this regard, it seems to be a positive side effect, that the course often attracts students who like to write German, but who are shy about speaking, and who find themselves in a rather relaxed speaking environment within this class, whose ostensive purpose, after all, is the improvement of writing skills.

The grading in the class is based on the quality of the articles submitted in relationship to the skill levels of the individual students. A second determining factor is the individual's dedication to the project, as shown in punctuality of getting assignments in, participation in the correction phase, helpfulness in the daily routine of putting the paper out, and to a large degree, originality of ideas and material brought to the project.

The cost of such a journalism class can be staggered according to funds available. Minimally it requires an instructor with some experience at least in reading German newspapers. A knowledge of basic layout practices is helpful and of the specific German press and newsreporting vocabulary, as students are rather inquisitive, and standard dictionaries often little or no help. The instructor can acquire such a specific vocabulary rather easily and inexpensively through the Deutschland-Nachrichten, which are supplied weekly and free of charge by the German Information Center in New York. These

Nachrichten are diverse and contain a wealth of appropriate vocabulary in usually no more than one or two paragraphs per news item. Press specific vocabulary appears from such varied fields as politics, economics, technology, ecology, sports, culture and literature, to name only a few. At least two electric typewriters with international keyboards are another minimal requirement. PC's with attached printers or spinwriters with international alphabet capability would be better. For duplicating purposes either a ditto- or a xerox-machine can be used. To give the newspaper a distinctive appearance, a catchy title is helpful and a paper color other than white. The German Summerschool opted for yellow journalism and chose goldenrod to reflect the summer season and also play on the title Blättchen, which, of course, may be a small sheet of paper, but also a fallen tree leaf. The most necessary ingredient for the project, aside from a captive audience, such as the one at an intensive summer language institute, is a group of dedicated and enthusiastic students, who want to learn the language and who will find such a class stimulating and relaxing enough at the same time not to think about acquiring language any longer, and thus perhaps acquire a lot of German.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Hanson is Associate Professor of German and Acting Chair of the Department of Modern and Classical Languages at the University of Wyoming in Laramie, Wyoming. There, for the past 13 years, he has taught German language courses and courses in Middle High German, History of the German Language, 19th and 20th Century German Drama, Advanced German Composition and Conversation, and Survey of German Literature. Recently he also developed a course in Diplomatic Translation for International Studies Majors. This course was funded through a grant, awarded to the University of Maryland by the U.S. Department of Education. Hanson is also a regular faculty member at the Deutsche Sommerschule am Pazifik in Portland, Oregon, where he has taught various courses in German literature and courses in Journalism Writing. He has also directed full length German play productions at this summer school for the past ten years.

His research interests include German Baroque literature, modern German drama and language pedagogy. He has published in these areas.